DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 465 147 CG 031 786

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TITLE Bullying Behavior at the Middle School Level: Are There Gender Differences?

PUB DATE 2002-03-06

NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Eastern Educational Research Association Conference (Sarasota, FL, February 27-March 2, 2002).

PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.

DESCRIPTORS *Bullying; *Middle School Students; Middle Schools; Policy Formation; *Sex Differences; *Student Attitudes; Student Behavior

ABSTRACT

This study examines the extent of bullying in an urban middle school and the potential differences in bullying behavior as a result of gender. An instrument consisting of 59 items was administered to all students (N=745) in grades six through eight. Regarding the effect of gender, the results presented overwhelming data supporting the fact that males are more likely to be physically and verbally abused than females. Significant gender differences were also found in the way students perceived each other being treated. Males were more likely to believe that discipline was not administered fairly; that students were not held accountable for their actions; and that they received less respect. Females reported more favorable relationships with teacher and their friends. The instrumentation provides data that could be useful in helping school officials develop an action plan to reduce bullying. (Contains 10 references and 1 table.) (GCP)

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BULLYING BEHAVIOR

BULLYING BEHAVIOR AT THE MIDDLE SCHOOL LEVEL: ARE THERE GENDER DIFFERENCES?

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Presentation at the Eastern Educational Research Association Conference in Sarasota, FL on February 28, 2002.

*due to the sensitive nature of the data, the school will not be identified.

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BULLYING BEHAVIOR AT THE MIDDLE SCHOOL LEVEL: ARE THERE GENDER DIFFERENCES?

Introduction

In our changing world, violence in the schools is a more frequent occurrence than in past years. School officials are searching for ways to reduce violence. School resource officers, metal detectors, locker searches, and the training of peer mediators are some of the attempts to reduce violence. More recently, the focus has shifted to efforts to reduce bullying behavior. There is some thought that bullying behavior could lead to violence. The research of Olweus (1993) revealed that one in seven students in Norway is involved in bullying activity either as a bully or victim. A study by Melton et. al., (1998) of 6000 middle school students during a three-month period in South Carolina as reported in Olweus, Limber, and Mihalic (1999) indicate the rate of bullying behavior is even higher than in Norway. The percentage of boys who bully others is 23% (4th grade), 24% (5th grade) and 25% (6th grade) compared to girls 16% (4th grade), 14% (5th grade) and 20% (6th grade). The percentage of boys who are bullied by others is 27% (4th grade), 22% (5th grade) and 19% (6th grade) compared to girls 26% (4th grade), 26% (5th grade) and 23% (6th grade).

According to Hoover and Oliver (1996), bullying behavior in the United States is more severe in the U.S. than any of the West European countries with the possible exception of Great Britain. In his Midwest survey of students in grades 8-12, 80% reported that they had been bullied at some point in their school career. Ninety percent of the students in grades 4-8 reported being bullied. At some point, they found that 59% of the students reported that they were not subjected to bullying behavior that school year. The data clearly support that bullying behavior in the U.S. is more severe and that it is worse during grades 5-8.

The severity of violence in our schools cannot be underscored enough. Reddick and Peach (1999), based on a survey by the U.S. Department of Education, reported that 3,000,000 criminal incidents occur each year, and 200,000 students are attacked each month. Beane (1999) stated that bullying behavior affects about five million elementary and junior high students. Peterson, (1999) reported that the victims of bullying behavior bear emotional scars that can lead to violence. Further the victim of bullying behavior is frequently disliked by peers. Bulach (1999) stated that this double whammy of being picked on by a bully and ostracized by peers can have devastating consequences.

The link between violence and bullying behavior is described in the publication by Olweus et al. (1999). They describe a Colorado based bullying prevention program that is designed as a "blueprint for violence prevention." A similar program that was implemented in Bergen, Norway resulted in a decrease of bully/victim problems by 50% over a two-year period. Other outcomes were an improved school climate and a reduction in thefts, vandalism and truancy. It would appear that any form of bullying creates resentment/anger in the recipient of that action. It is believed that this can and often will lead to some form of conflict or violence. There is a clear need to identify the extent to which bullying behavior is a problem.

Purpose of the Study

As a result of this need, school officials in an urban school district near Atlanta, GA, decided to investigate the extent of bullying behavior in their middle school. They were also curious if gender played any role in bullying behavior. Consequently, the purpose of this research is twofold: (1) to determine if there are differences in bullying behavior as a result of gender, and (2) to assess and describe the extent of bullying behavior in the middle school.

Definitions:

Bullying behavior is defined as any form of verbal or physical abuse with intent to harm or hurt. Another word often used to describe bullying behavior is "picked on." There is one qualifier to bullying behavior. According to Olweus (1998) verbal or physical abuse between equals is not bullying behavior. In order for that behavior to be labeled as bullying, the aggressor must be superior physically, psychologically or in some other way. For example, if a student were not superior physically or psychologically, but had a big brother or a gang that could exact punishment, this could be used to bully a victim.

Instrumentation

The instrument developed by Bulach et al. (1999) was used for the purposes of this study. The first draft of the instrument went through several pilot administrations, revisions, and factor analyses. The final version consisted of 59 items and was administered to all students (N = 745) in grades six through eight.

Scoring/analysis

The first eight items on the instrument measure a category of data that could be relevant for developing pro-active measures to curtail bullying behavior, e.g., grade level, gender, parental status, etc. The remaining 51 items measure student perceptions of behaviors thought to be relevant for bullying. Students respond to each of the items according to a five-point Likert scale ranging from "never" to "always." Never is scored as a 1.0 and always is scored as a 5.0. Twenty-four of the items are negative behaviors, e.g., "I am picked on because of the way I look." Students who respond with a "never" to a negative behavior receive a positive score of 1.0. An "always" response would receive a negative score of 5.0, i.e., the higher the score the more negative the response. Twenty-six of the items are stated as positive behaviors, e.g., "students show respect for each other." An "always" or positive response to this type of behavior is reverse scores, e.g., an "always" response is scored as a 1.0 and a "never" response is scored as 5.0.

A factor analysis revealed that the scale had five factors as follows:

- Factor one--where bullying occurs; (ten behaviors)
- Factor two--the type and reason for bullying; (six behaviors)
- Factor three--how students are treated; (nine behaviors)
- Factor four--the way students report bullying behavior; (five behaviors) and
- Factor five--feelings of self-efficacy (twenty-one).

There were two behaviors that did not load on factor five, but they were placed with factor five because it was believed they measured some aspect of self-efficacy. They are as follows:

- when I am in a tough situation, I think positively; and
- I get embarrassed easily.

A Cronbach alpha was used to determine the reliability of the instrument. Factors one through five had correlation coefficients as follows: factor one = +.82, factor two = +.82, factor three = +.75, factor 4 = +.72, and factor five = +.68. The overall measure of internal consistency and reliability yielded a correlation coefficient of +.85.

Procedures

Students (750), consisting of 241 6th graders, 232 7th graders, and 244 8th graders and 33 special education students, were informed that we were concerned about students picking on each other at the school and wanted their perceptions on this issue. Students completed the instrument during a class period.

Data analysis

Multiple analysis of variance (MANOVA) was the statistical procedure for determining if there were significant differences on the behaviors for each factor by category as a result of gender differences. Descriptive statistics were also used to describe the data.

Results

Significant differences were found on some behaviors in each factor. In factor # 1 dealing with where bullying happens, the following differences were found as a result of gender differences (male N = 365 and female N = 372):

- More males than females reported that they are picked on in the bathroom. One hundred and ninety-one students out of 737 students (26%) agreed that they were picked on in the bathroom. Of this number 123, were male and 68 were female. The Phi value was .223 ($p < .000$).

More males than females reported that bullying behavior occurs when staff is not around. Eighty-seven boys compared to 68 girls reported that they are picked on when staff is not around for a total of 155 students (21%). The Phi value was .156 ($p < .001$).

In factor # 2 dealing with the type and reason for bullying, the following differences were found as a result of gender differences:

- More males than females reported that they were physically abused. Nineteen males compared to seven females agreed that they were being physically abused

for a total of 26 students (3.5%). The Phi value was .177 (p < .000). Forty-three male students also reported that they were **sometimes** physically abused compared to 27 female students.

In factor # 3 which measured the way students are treated, the following differences were found as a result of gender differences:

- More males than females reported that students do **not** show respect for each other. One hundred thirty males compared to 97 females reported that students do **not** respect each other for a total of 227 students (31%). The Phi value was .133 (p < .011).
- More females than males reported that students are held accountable for their actions. Two hundred and fifty-five females agreed with this statement and 27 disagreed compared to 230 males who agreed and 59 who disagreed. The Phi value was .144 (p < .004).
- More females than males reported that student discipline is fairly administered. One hundred and eighty females agreed with this statement and 74 disagreed compared to 147 males who agreed and 105 who disagreed. The Phi value was .147 (p < .003).
- More males than females reported that people do **not** care about each other. One hundred thirty-seven males or 38% of male students reported that people at this school do **not** care about them compared to 101 or 27% of the female students. The Phi value was .165 (p < .001). Only 69 males and 95 females reported that people cared about them. Most of the students (330) reported that sometimes people cared.
- More females than males reported that teachers help them to understand and get along with other students. One hundred sixty-five females agreed with this statement compared to 107 males for a total of 272 students (37%). Eighty-seven males and 68 females disagreed with this statement. The Phi value was .134 (p < .011).
- More females than males reported that teachers help them to feel good about themselves. One hundred seventy-one females agreed with this statement compared to 147 males for a total of 218 students (30%). One hundred twenty-seven males and 68 females disagreed with this statement. The Phi value was .156 (p < .001).
- More females than males reported that teachers help them to feel good about their school. One hundred seventy-one females agreed with this statement compared to 147 males for a total of 218 students (30%). One hundred twenty-seven males and 68 females disagreed with this statement. The Phi value was .156 (p < .001).
- More females than males reported that their friends support them. Two hundred sixty females agreed with this statement compared to 189 males for a total of 218 students (62%). Forty-eight males and 22 females disagreed with this statement. The Phi value was .245 (p < .000).

In factor # 4 which measured the way students report bullying, the following differences were found as a result of gender differences:

- More males (247) than females (215) indicated they would **not** report bullying to someone working at the school. The Phi value was .123 ($p < .026$). Only 11% of the student body (43 males and 40 females) indicated they would report it.
- More males (160) than females (91) indicated they would **not** report bullying to a teacher. The Phi value was .225 ($p < .000$). Only 30% of the student body (86 males and 130 females) indicated they would report it.
- More males (130) than females (58) indicated they would **not** report bullying to a parent or guardian. The Phi value was .265 ($p < .000$). Only 47% of the student body (131 males and 216 females) indicated they would report it.
- More males (141) than females (62) indicated they would **not** report bullying to their friends. The Phi value was .297 ($p < .000$). Only 41% of the student body (106 males and 295 females) indicated they would report it.
- More males (80) than females (29) indicated they would **not** report bullying to anybody. The Phi value was .229 ($p < .000$). Fifty-eight percent of the student body (176 males and 248) females indicated they would report it to someone.
-

In factor # 5 which dealt with matters of self efficacy, the following differences were found as a result of gender differences:

- More females (171) than males (88) reported that they were nervous when they tried out for things. The Phi value was .264 ($p < .000$).
- More females (254) than males (212) reported that they learn from their mistakes. The Phi value was .129 ($p < .016$). A similar pattern emerged when they reported learning from others' mistakes--females (198) and males (166). The Phi value was .130 ($p < .015$).
- More females (120) than males (79) reported that they are easily embarrassed. The Phi value was .153 ($p < .002$). Conversely 165 males and 128 females reported that they were **not** easily embarrassed (40%).
- More males (264) than females (229) reported that they like the way they look. The Phi value was .132 ($p < .013$).
- More females (224) than males (172) reported that they did **not** get along with other students. The Phi value was .153 ($p < .002$).
- More males (234) than females (214) reported that they were **not** stubborn. The Phi value was .125 ($p < .023$).
- More females (338) than males (314) reported that they want things to work well for themselves and want things to work well for others (females = 308 and males = 260). The respective Phi values were .133 and .179 ($p < .012$ and .000).

The second purpose of this research was to assess the extent of bullying behavior at the school (see table # 1). School officials were interested in comparing bullying behavior at the school with bullying behavior outside the school. One hundred twenty-five students (17%) reported some

form of bullying behavior of a verbal nature outside school setting compared to 217 (30%) students at the school. Forty-six students (6%) reported some form of bullying behavior of a physical nature outside the school setting compared to 98 (13%) at the school.

School officials were also interested in learning more about why students were being bullied. Seventy-seven students (10%) responded that they were picked on because of their name. One hundred and two (14%) responded that they were picked on because of the way they looked. Seventy-nine (10%) responded that they were picked on because of their clothes, and 187 (25%) responded that they were picked on for other reasons.

Discussion

Regarding the effect of gender, there is overwhelming data supporting the fact that males are more likely to be physically and verbally abused than females. This behavior occurs regardless of whether it was physical abuse, being picked on in the bathroom, or when the faculty was not around. The findings of this study regarding gender support those of Melton et al (1998).

Significant gender differences also were found in the way students perceive each other being treated. Males are more likely to believe the following: (1) that discipline is not administered fairly, (2) that students are not held accountable for their actions, and (3) that they receive less respect. Not only do they perceive that they receive less respect, but they also see less caring behaviors. That is not to say that respect or caring behaviors are not present because two-thirds of the students reported that they do respect and care for each other. However, school officials are concerned with roughly one third of the student body believing that caring and respect are not present. According to Bulach (1998) "students cannot be taught nor can learning be fostered until they are convinced the teacher cares about them. Their human need to feel cared about must be met" (p. 442). In a related work Bulach (2000) stated "When you know someone cares about you, the foundation is laid for further relationships. The relationship between teachers and students has to be based on those behaviors identified in the learning process. They are the following: listening, caring, trust, openness, and risk-taking. The end result of this circuitous process is students who are willing to learn" (p.9). Assuming Bulach's theory is correct, an increase in caring behaviors could result in an increase in test scores.

Females also reported more favorable relationships with teachers and their friends. Females are more likely to have friends who support them, teachers who help them feel good about themselves and help them get along with other students. They are also more likely to report that their teachers help them feel good about their school. Based on the data, it could be concluded that females have a more positive perception of how they are treated than do the males.

Regarding reporting of bullying behavior, males are less likely to report it than girls. One hundred and forty-nine males or 39% indicated that they would not tell their friends compared to 247 or 68% who reported they would not tell someone at school. It appears that there is a culture operating that causes males to be reluctant to report it. Reporting it may be perceived as a sign of weakness. For example, are boys supposed to be tough and take care of the bully themselves?

Because it may be perceived as a sign of weakness, the majority of male students may not want others to know.

Based on the data, it would appear that boys are more positive on some self-efficacy behaviors than girls. They report being less nervous when trying out for new things, getting along better with other students, being embarrassed less easily, and liking the way they look. Females on the other hand are more positive in learning from their own and other's mistakes and wanting things to work well for themselves and others. It is possible that the more positive score on these behaviors for females could be attributed to the fact that they are more introspective. Then again it could be caused because teachers treat them better than males (factor three). Whether teachers do treat them better is questionable, but the data supports that they perceive they are treated better by faculty.

Limitation of the study

The data generated by this study are self-reported data and may not correspond to actual behaviors. Students may not have understated or overstated how they actually felt or were treated.

Conclusions

The data clearly supports that females are treated differently than males. They feel safer and more believe that the faculty cares about them. It can also be concluded that bullying behavior does occur at school and that it is worse when the faculty is not around. Based on the data it would appear that males are subject to more bullying behavior and have a more difficult time at the middle school level than females. The instrumentation provides a wealth of data that is useful in helping school officials develop an action plan to reduce bullying. The instrument could also be a valuable resource for consultants who have been asked to work with a school to reduce incidents of violence or bullying behavior. Based on the data, school officials would be more able to cope with our rapidly changing world and reduce violence and bullying behavior.

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Table 1
Frequency and Types of Bullying Behavior

Behavior	Sometimes	A lot	Always	Percentage
Verbally pick on me in my neighborhood	75	23	27	17%
Physically pick on me in my neighborhood	27	8	11	6%
Verbally pick on me while I am at school	127	58	32	30%
Physically pick on while I am at school	70	16	12	13%
I am picked on because of my name	44	15	18	10%
I am picked on because of the way I look	96	31	35	14%
I am picked on because of the clothes I wear	50	16	13	10%
I am picked on because of other reasons	118	42	27	25%
N = 748				